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The Russian system has profoundly changed since Pushkin's day, or has it?

Involuntary Journey To Siberia

By Andrei Amalrik.
Translated from the Russian by Manya Harari and Max Hayward. Introduction by Max Hayward.
297 pp. New York: A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. $6.95.

Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?

By Andrei Amalrik.
Preface by Henry Kamm. Commentary by Sidney Monas.
93 pp. New York: Harper & Row. $4.95.

By HARRISON E. SALISBURY

"Oh Lord," Alexander Pushkin exclaimed after reading "Dead Souls," "how wretched our Russia is!"

Nearly a century and a half have passed since then. The last Romanov Czar expired in the cellar of a Siberian merchant's house, a peasant's execution bullet in his head, 52 years ago and it was in Communism's 48th year—1965—that Andrei Amalrik began his "Involuntary Journey to Siberia," or to put it plainly, his two-and-a-half-year term in exile as a "parasite" or one who in the eyes of the Soviet police had no visible means of support.

The Russian system has profoundly changed since Pushkin's day, or has it? Again and again as you read Amalrik the words echo in your ears —how wretched Russia is! How wretched life still is in the Russian village! How banal the quarrels over herding the heifers, how niggardly the socialist shopkeepers, how endlessly mediocre the quality of relations between one villager and the next; between the peasants and the dreary officials, the ignorant policemen, the provincial commissars.

Here is Guryevka, the village near Tomsk to which he was exiled in 1965, as sketched by Amalrik:

"Most of the houses were old. Only a few of the more substantial ones had slate roofs; the rest were thatched. . . . The fruit trees that had once grown on the plots had been cut down and potatoes planted instead. . . . Icons hung in almost every house, but the attitude toward religion was one of utter indifference and the old men would ask: 'Who can tell if God exists or not?'. . . . Many houses had radio sets but half of them didn't work because the strength of the electric current kept changing. . . . The peasants' life was remarkably dull; all their free time was spent working on their private plots. Their main distraction was drink, especially in winter, when they drank nearly every day."

I know that the Moscow agitprops will say the comparison is unfair and demeaning; that Russia is now an urban industrial state; her Gross National Product grows each year; her sputniks and space satellites rival and surpass the American; but the truth is that 44 per cent of the Soviet population still lives in the countryside (by this year's census). To be sure, conditions are better on the great state farms of the Kuban, the well-managed and well-financed collectives of the Ukraine and on the show farms around Moscow. But what of the rest? After all, it is hardly two decades since Nikita Khrushchev found the peasants in his native village of Kalinovka in a state close to starvation.

No, the miserable condition of life in Russian villages is a pertinent factor in any evaluation of the Soviet state, just as the character of the ordinary Soviet villager is a pertinent factor in any evaluation of the success or failure of the Soviet leadership in moving toward Vladimir Lenin's utopian dream of creating a new "Soviet man," idealistic, free to fulfill his talent and genius, unmarred by the evils of capitalist exploitation.

Of course, in these terms the Soviet state and its lumpenbureaucracy have failed, as Amalrik so tellingly reveals—failed so terribly that Amalrik does not believe the regime will survive the century. The system, he is convinced, contains the seeds of its own dissolution. He has even picked its obituary date—the year 1984, chosen, he admits, at the puckish suggestion of a friend who is obviously familiar with Orwell.

But there is nothing puckish about Amalrik's conception of Russia's future. The Soviet Union is sinking into the same bureaucratic scholasticism, administrative repression and inner decay which doomed the Romanovs. Just as military defeat by Japan in 1905 set the stage for revolutionary overthrow in 1917 so Amalrik now sees the Soviet falling apart after a new Far Eastern defeat, this time at the hands of China.

Neither of Amalrik's two books have been published in the Soviet Union, although both have circulated in typescript or mimeograph form—*samizdat*, or self-publishing, as the Russian phrase has it. "Journey" was written first, begun during his exile years 1965-1967 and completed on his return to Moscow. "Will the Soviet Union Survive Until 1984?" was completed in the spring of 1969.

Many Western observers will argue with Amalrik over the details of his predictions. But none will argue about the precise and accurate picture which he paints of the reality of Russian life. Many Russians, too,

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